

## Care of the Soul

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert D. Flanagan for the  
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“All that is mine is yours.”

We might criticize Rembrandt for taking liberty with the Parable of the Prodigal Son in his painting of it. He places all the parable’s characters in the same room at the same time and adds a few others. When we examine his masterpiece, however, we can see he has captured the full essence of the parable.

After hearing the reading and looking carefully at the eldest son, we see he needed saving. He was caught in the sins of pride, anger, jealousy, and contempt. He held with pride his position as the eldest son. He was angry about the party celebrating his brother’s return. He was jealous that his father had poured his affection and love on his wayward, wasteful brother. He was contemptuous of his father’s actions and his brother’s return. The eldest son didn’t celebrate his brother’s return. He instead yelled at his father, saying, “Listen!” His jealousy poured out as he said that he’d worked like a slave and he and his friends never got to party. He finished his rant by adding, “You have killed the fatted calf for him!” Don’t we also hear him saying, “How dare you!”

Yes. The first half of the parable shows us how far a father will go when his lost son has returned. We must notice that the younger son hadn’t repented, nor had he lost any of his cunning. He simply returned because he was hungry and out of money. He didn’t like feeding pigs. It was beneath him. In returning, he figured he could play on his father’s emotions one more time and be welcomed home. The younger son had not become a saint. He hadn’t found religion. He “came to himself,” as if his hangover had worn off.

We can interpret the prodigal son’s return and the father’s reaction in a positive light. The father ran to his son and put his arms around him and kissed him. The story tells us not just about the compassion of a parent, but how far God will go to welcome us back.

We can find comfort in the first half of the parable, but the second half is troubling and disturbing. The eldest son was ungrateful. He didn’t recognize his privilege. He looked at his brother’s return with disdain.

We may conclude that the eldest brother was wise. He was, perhaps, smarter than his father. He could see right through his brother’s actions. He knew just who his little brother was and what he could do. He likely scoffed at his brother when they met. He likely sneered with cynicism. He resented that his brother was back. In Rembrandt’s painting, we see the eldest brother half shrouded in darkness. His face illuminated with contempt as he looked down his nose at his brother; His hands close to his body, holding a stick by which he could keep his father and brother away from him.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son can be comforting to us, but we can’t ignore the second half. It shows the darker side of the human condition, the ugly bits and pieces.

When I was a School Minister, I selected a dozen or so seniors each year to help me. They were called Chapel Prefects. Like any high school leadership position, it was coveted. I made my selections carefully, mindful of the public aspect of leading chapel three times a week. I typically picked the best kids in the school, those whom students and faculty respected.

In any given year, however, one of my selections would be out of the box. I would choose a kid who wasn't the best. That student was someone who I thought or had been told might benefit from the chance to lead. Often the student was known for breaking some of the school's rules and getting away with it. They weren't good kids, and they hadn't repented, but I saw something in them, call it potential, light, or hope. If I gave the student a chance, they would, hopefully, rise to the occasion. It was risky. It would look bad for the school and me if the kid got caught breaking a major school rule and expelled.

When I made such a selection, the school would buzz. Students who knew me well would come to me and question my pick. They would suggest others who were better. No question those who they named were great kids and deserving. They were students who never skipped chapel, never broke school rules, and would benefit from being appointed a Chapel Prefect. They were better than the student I was taking a risk on.

I understood what the students were asking me. But they were missing the point. Look at this morning's parable, notice that the father didn't defend his actions. He didn't try to explain away why he was accepting his wayward, sinful son back into his household. The father expressed his love for his youngest son. He also showed his love for his eldest son. He said to him, "All that is mine is yours." The father loved both his sons. That irked the eldest son. In making my selections for Chapel Prefect, I tried to show that all students had value. God's love is for all.

The sin of the eldest son is common. We all can fall into the trap where we feel we deserve to be treated better than we've been. But what the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches is that God loves all of us. It shows us "that all people are uniquely and completely loved." The Roman Catholic scholar and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen explains, "In the light of God I can finally see my neighbor as my brother, as the one who belongs as much to God as I do. But outside of God's house, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, lovers and friends become rivals; each perpetually plagued by jealousies, suspicions, and resentments" (81).

If we stay in the role of the eldest brother, then we only see the dark side of people. When we do, we are the ones who are lost. We're the ones standing outside the light and love of God. We're the ones in need of saving.

God will come to us and lovingly reach out for us to return. We must, however, let go of the dark emotions of jealousy, contempt, anger, and pride. We must seek lives of gratitude. We can start by recognizing the gifts God has already given us. Henri Nouwen says it best, "Every gift I acknowledge reveals another and another until, finally, even the most normal, obvious, and seemingly mundane event or encounter proves to be filled with grace" (86). Amen.

Sources:

Levine, Amy-Jill and Marc Zvi Brettler eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).